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## Iran and Venezuela: A nuclear "Rogue Axis" ?

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## Iran and Venezuela: a nuclear "Rogue Axis"?

Iran and Venezuela have established a "revolutionary partnership" that speaks the language of Anti-Americanism and is funded by vast resource revenues. But just how dangerous is this self-proclaimed "alliance of revolutionary brother-nations," this "Axis of Good," as Chávez likes to call his like-minded allies?

A closer look at the two "rogue states" reveals more differences than similarities and calls the true nature of their partnership into question. Even though strong rhetorical commonalities exist, visible in the way they conjure the specter of resources as instruments of power and threat, in their shared anti-Imperialism geared towards the United States, in the way they proudly paint themselves as beleaguered underdogs of the Western-dominated world system and, not least, in the way they use foreign policy as a means of distraction from failures in domestic policies. Yet, their respective regional contexts, the structure of their alliances and the legitimacy they enjoy among their neighbors, their foreign policy aims and motivations as well as their ideological foundations are just too much apart to make this a strong and sustainable partnership of deep-seated and enduring values.<sup>[i]</sup>

But even if the bond between Iran and Venezuela is more propaganda than substance, the trend towards closer cooperation between the "rogues" is indeed problematic. The potential for cooperation is there: After all, the revolution needs independence. Thus, the hard core of Venezuela's diplomacy has been the acquisition of strategic technologies that lessen her economy's dependence on oil.

A prominent technology in this context has long been the "nuclear option".<sup>[ii]</sup> Chávez has long shown an interest in a nuclear reactor of his own, but has not been able to purchase one from neither Argentina nor Brazil. Iran's forays into the nuclear field, however, could prove important and valuable to an equally ambitious Venezuela. As one of Bolivarian Venezuela's main international allies and even as a "strategic partner", Ahmadinejad's Iran would be an obvious partner to enlist in this risky and expensive endeavor. Over time, the most ambitious field of common interests between Iran and Venezuela, therefore, could become a cooperation in the area of nuclear technology.

Between Iran and Venezuela mostly economic complementarities exist. Venezuela has technical know-how in the gas and oil sectors, while Iran has industrial knowledge, for example in the automobile manufacturing, in the production of tractors and plastics. In these areas cooperation between those two countries already exists. Venezuela has laid ground for a gasoline refinery in Iran, undermining the most effective sanctions the West could have implemented in the struggle for Iran's nuclear program: a gasoline embargo of Iran. Even though that country is rich in oil and gas it lacks in refineries. Through this cooperation, Iran buys time for further negotiations until it finishes its nuclear program (be it military or civilian), Venezuela buys sensitive technology that leads to stronger diversification and development as well as greater autonomy from the United States.

Since the West and Venezuela's neighbors do not trust the Chávez Administration with this sensitive technology, his quest for an alternative technology source is rational. The farther the revolution progresses the more important the nuclear option becomes. It frees up oil for the lucrative export business (or the kind of petrodiplomacy Bolivarianism has come to be associated with) while at the same time continuing to guarantee energy autarky at home. Venezuela has explicitly not discarded this nuclear option, has campaigned for peaceful reactor tech-

nology during Chávez' state visit in Russia and also very publicly held up every country's "right of nuclear self-determination" in the discussions on the nuclear fuel cycles of Brazil and Iran. The Chávez Administration was the only member country in the IAEA to have voted against the sanctions against Iran. Official rhetoric and diplomacy has already set the ground for Venezuela's nuclear option.

Venezuela has been trying to buy a reactor for some time now, but a nuclear program of her own would be much more valuable for the country. Even if this option (still) seems to lie in the distant future, it nevertheless becomes more probable with every year the "revolution" rages on in both countries, Iran and Venezuela. It is not unlikely that a perpetuated "Bolivarian Revolution" – modeled after the Cuban system under the lifelong presidency of Hugo Chávez – would raise its self-esteem to a level where it would no longer accept the nuclear gap between Venezuela and her big neighbor and rival Brazil within the struggle for regional leadership. Brazil is today the only Latin American country with a complete fuel cycle of its own.

Venezuela is not pursuing military interests with the atom. In spite of the somewhat hysterical official rhetoric and the powerful modernization of her armed forces (with Russian help), the country does not really feel threatened by some possible military intervention from the United States (or its close ally Colombia). However, she does not want to stay dependent on overseas reactor technology that makes the revolution prone to potential blackmail. For Russia and Iran Venezuela could therefore be a lucrative export market – and an opportunity to break the West's (restrictive) technology monopoly over the region.

The decisive question will be whether the "nuclear brother" Iran will really share its hard-won technology with Venezuela. This is indeed unlikely. But if not for ideological then for pragmatic economic reasons will Iran be able to provide active assistance for building nuclear reactors and maybe even for enriching (small amounts of) uranium. It is true that the relationship between Iran and Venezuela is more one of convenience than of ideology. Still, the more Iran is isolated internationally, the more probable a nuclear technology transfer becomes. Because in a context of rising international pressure, Iran and Venezuela more and more depend on mutual loyalty – the kind of *Nibelungentreue*, of unquestioning loyalty that can be counted upon even in adverse times. This could change the political calculus of sharing technology.

There are at least four reasons why the possibility of a nuclear link between Iran and Venezuela should not be discarded too easily:

1. The changing nuclear context in Latin America. The atom has enjoyed a strong resurgence in importance as a means for securing energy autarky of the emerging economies in the region. Argentina and Brazil have just signed a "nuclear pact" to jointly build "a new reactor to enrich uranium" and develop "a program of peaceful cooperation in nuclear matters".<sup>[iii]</sup> Both countries are in the midst of enlarging their nuclear base, with third reactors underway. Chile, too, is now thinking about adding nuclear energy to her energy mix, with the main argument being securing energy self-sufficiency for its rapidly growing economy. A high-level panel, the "Comisión Zanelli" has recently recommended the introduction of nuclear energy production to diversify Chilean energy sources!<sup>[iv]</sup> In this nuclear-powered context, Venezuela -- as the regional leader that it sees itself -- will not want to stay behind.

2. Venezuela's leadership is especially jealous of Brazil's nuclear prowess. The once richest country in Latin America feels a certain inferiority complex towards the big and (politically, economically and technologically) successful neighbor. Brazil is following its technological vision "Brasil potencia" with renewed effort, promising hundreds of millions of dollars for the national nuclear program, including a new reactor at Angra do Reis, the intensification of the

enrichment process for commercial use (Brazil has the 6<sup>th</sup> largest uranium reserves) and the development of the long dreamt-of nuclear-powered submarine.<sup>[v]</sup> If Brazil has been able to secure a fuel-cycle of its own, this will spur similar ambitions in Venezuela. More so, since the option of sharing in Brazilian reactor technology has vanished. Venezuela's unprecedented oil bonanza has now made this expensive technology attainable.

3. Iran is only one of the potential suppliers, but not an improbable one. Venezuela has long sought to buy a reactor and has been talking of Iran as a possible supplier since May 2005.<sup>[vi]</sup> The strong ties both leaders have forged in OPEC and also through at least eight personal visits between Ahmadinejad and Chávez envision a lofty "strategic alliance" but explicitly entail the transfer of technology.<sup>[vii]</sup> Chávez has again and again hinted at the possibility of a nuclear deal with Iran<sup>[viii]</sup>, even if it lies in the (near to medium-term) future<sup>[ix]</sup> -- exactly because he believes this "revolutionary alliance" to be long-lived. He sees his pro-Iranian rhetoric as an investment: legitimacy will one day buy technology.

4. Sooner or later, emerging countries strive for technological autarky. Venezuela has held the door open for a nuclear option of its own.<sup>[x]</sup> Originally, this just meant a nuclear reactor, but more and more this includes a national fuel cycle. Nuclear technology means new technological dependencies. If the "Bolivarian revolution" and the international isolation it entails is to be made permanent, then Venezuela needs "technological protection". Even if Russia is already supplying countries like Iran with reactor technology where the West has been reluctant to provide it. Theoretically at least, Venezuela could be a another market for Russian reactor technology since Chávez has bought rifles, helicopters and airplanes for over 3 billion USD (and is negotiating for diesel-powered submarines).<sup>[xi]</sup> The Russians have so far reacted coolly towards his advances. But trading Western nuclear dependency (reactor technology and uranium enrichment) for Russian nuclear dependency will not be acceptable for any proud and independent country, less so for an Iran eager to project its new weight in the Gulf. Iran will sooner than later master the technology of uranium enrichment and also of building a reactor of its own. Other countries have succeeded in this before: Brazil, Argentina and Germany are among them, the latter two of which have repeatedly sold reactors to third countries. In a capitalist world, why would Iran not share its technology among its friends – for a prize?

So a further proliferation of nuclear technology is already on the way. Reasons for the acquisition of nuclear technology will vary from growing energy needs to the political weight and legitimacy this technology gives emerging countries on the world stage. That is why ambitious and emerging middle powers will be the main beneficiaries and accelerators of this new "wave of nuclearisation".

The answer to the looming nuclear multipolarity, however, is not a penalization of the nuclear technology transfer itself (for the West will not be able to enforce it against other suppliers), but the recognition of these transactions as economic opportunities other non-Western powers have no moral qualms about. So, the answer has to be a push to rally all the suppliers around the idea of more transparency, oversight and monitoring of the technology. But in the end, a diffusion of nuclear technology among ambitious middle powers seems inevitable – and not all of them will be liked by the West.

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[i] More references in: Christian E. Rieck / Dustin Dehéz, *Die « Schurkenachse » - Der Iran und Venezuela*, WeltTrends 1/2008, p. 59-71.

[ii] This is an expansion of an argument I have made before: Christian E. Rieck, *Reaktoren für die Revolution*, Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik 1/2008, p. 27-29.

[iii] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_7260000/7260126.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_7260000/7260126.stm)

[iv] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_7119000/7119847.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_7119000/7119847.stm) ,  
the full Report can be downloaded here:

[http://www.cchen.cl/mediateca/PDF/report\\_zanelli.pdf](http://www.cchen.cl/mediateca/PDF/report_zanelli.pdf)

[v] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_6290000/6290596.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_6290000/6290596.stm)

[vi] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_4351000/4351256.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_4351000/4351256.stm)

[vii] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_6257000/6257619.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_6257000/6257619.stm)

[viii] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_6262000/6262646.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_6262000/6262646.stm)

[ix] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_5355000/5355024.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_5355000/5355024.stm)

[x] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_6253000/6253386.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_6253000/6253386.stm)

[xi] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin\\_america/newsid\\_5220000/5220718.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/spanish/latin_america/newsid_5220000/5220718.stm)

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